

Friday's Feature
By
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Caterpillars in your yard

There is no more delightful decoration for a garden than nature's own butterflies. On a warm sunny day these lofty insects provide color and motion to the landscape. Many gardeners specifically design flower beds to attract and encourage butterflies. They relish the idea of their plants being total consumed by caterpillars, the immature stage of butterflies and moths. Others are lucky enough to have caterpillars in their yard but don't recognize them as some of our most beautiful butterflies.

One caterpillar that is very active this time of year is the orangedog, the immature stage of the giant swallowtail butterfly. It primarily feeds on citrus. Orangedogs are mottled dark gray to light brown, and are said to look like "bird droppings." When mature, the caterpillar is about 1-1/2 inches long.

If disturbed, two orange, horn-like projections emerge from the head, and it produces a pungent lemony odor, a defensive mechanism against predators.



**The orangedog caterpillar
feeds on citrus plants**

The orangedog adult, the beautiful giant swallowtail, is large and predominantly velvet black in color with a double series of large yellow spots across the wings.

Orangedogs are potentially harmful only to very young trees; older trees can easily withstand the loss of a few leaves.

One caterpillar that is frightful looking is the very large hickory horned devil. This fierce-looking caterpillar is the immature stage of the regal moth. Full-grown caterpillars are dull green and can reach lengths of four to five inches. Behind the head are long, stout, orange and black spines or "horns."

The hickory horned devil caterpillar has been reported on a variety of host tree species. They are commonly found on



Hickory horned devil caterpillar

walnut and a variety of hickories including pecan. In Florida, they are frequently found on sweetgum and less frequently on persimmon and sumacs.

The adult stage of the hickory horned devil, the regal or royal walnut moth, is one of our largest and most spectacular moths. Females can have a six inch wingspan. It is an orange-red color with yellow spots and markings.

The hickory horned devil is a solitary feeder that has never been reported to be abundant enough to be considered a pest. Because they are harmless to people, pesticides are not appropriate.

The gulf fritillary butterfly is a common site in our area. As its name implies, this beautiful butterfly haunts the Gulf of Mexico, and may be seen flying far out over the water. The upperside of their wings are bright orange with black markings while the undersides of the wings have many large silver spots.

The gulf fritillary caterpillar is 1-1/4 to 1-3/4 inches long at maturity and has an orange body with several rows of black spines along the entire length. This caterpillar is often confused with the oleander caterpillar. The oleander caterpillar is also a bright orange caterpillar but has tufts of long black hairs whereas the gulf fritillary has black spines.

The gulf fritillary caterpillar is passionate about the passion vine (Passiflora), often called the maypop. It will often totally defoliate an entire vine. But don't worry, the passion vine usually recovers.

So before you pull out the pesticides when you see a caterpillar eating your plant, take the time to identify it first. Many of these plant munching caterpillars turn into beautiful, valued butterflies.

Tip of the Week: Several species of butterflies are attracted to free-standing water puddles. They not only benefit from a drink but also utilize salts and breakdown products of decaying vegetation which is present in most puddles.

To keep your puddles from becoming a source of mosquitoes, bury a shallow potted plant saucer to its rim in an area receiving full sun in the butterfly garden. Fill the saucer with coarse pine bark or stones and fill to overflowing with water. The butterflies are able to drink from the cracks between the pine bark pieces or the stones while the mosquito larvae have a difficult time becoming established.



The gulf fritillary caterpillar is frequently seen on passion vine.

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